

How To Get a Call Sign

By Lt. Charles Rowland

I was outside my seven-day, night-currency window, and needed a day and a night trap on USS *Nimitz* (CVN-68) to regain currency. I had been in a rush ever since my first flight, which was long and uneventful. Unfortunately, I was a half-hour late for my next brief and found the rest of the crew waiting for me as I entered the ready room. I took off my gear and quickly began to brief them. They already had completed the mission portion of the brief and filled me in on the details. I grabbed a bite to eat, read the aircraft book, and put back on my flight gear. The day already was long and getting longer.

I sat in the pilot's seat of aircraft 601, the newest edition to the Wallbangers' fleet of four Hawkeye-2000 aircraft. With both engines turning, we were ready to taxi. Events finally were slowing down to a normal pace as we taxied to cat 2 for launch.

We were scheduled to launch 10 minutes before the rest of the aircraft in the cycle, as it was our job to control them. We spread our wings and watched as the shuttle came aft down the track. The director hurriedly put us in tension and passed control to the shooter. The parking brake was off, my feet came off the brakes and down to the deck, and the nosewheel-steering handle was stowed. I ran up the engines to 2,500 horsepower and then quickly to maximum power when the shooter gave the signal. I checked all the gauges, received a ready call from the NFOs in the back, and asked the

copilot if he liked what he saw.

A second later, the copilot was shaking his head at the shooter and calling over the radio to the tower, "Suspend. Suspend. Suspend cat 2".

A few tense moments later, the cat was safe, and the shooter gave us the throttle-back sign. The copilot said he had seen something fall off the instrument panel when we had run up the engines. The panel violently shakes when the engines are at maximum power.

I set the parking brake, and we moved back our seats to search for the object. I spotted what turned out to be an instrument-light mount near my right foot. The copilot reached over and picked it up. He then called tower to tell them we had recovered our FOD and were ready to try again. Tower said we'd have to wait until the normal launch started. We saw the shuttle go back to the bow—so much for our 10-minute-early launch.

We sat for eight minutes, cursing our FOD and annoyed at the wait. With no prior warning, the shuttle came aft toward us, and the deck-status light turned green. In a matter of seconds, the taxi director looked forward and aft, then gave us the signal for tension and passed control to the shooter. The shooter quickly gave us the signal for maximum power.

In the cockpit, I dropped my feet from the brakes, touched the nosewheel-steering handle to make sure it was in, and scanned the instruments as I ran up power.



Photo by PHA Stephen Early. Modified.

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but I knew something was very wrong.*

Everything looked good to me: The ready call came from the back, and the copilot agreed we were good to go—no FOD this time. He saluted the shooter to indicate we were ready, and everyone braced for the shot. Three, two, one, acceleration, but something didn't feel right. The ride was very bumpy, almost as though the aircraft did not want to go flying. The plane shuddered back and forth like only one side at a time was touching the ground.

I didn't immediately realize what had happened, but I knew something was very wrong. As soon as the stroke was over, I threw up the gear handle—I wanted as little drag on the aircraft as possible to help make sure we remained airborne. Well, my thought may have been correct, but my earlier actions were not. A second after the gear handle was up, the call came from tower, "601, I think you left the parking brake set; you blew

your tires, one for sure, and probably the other one."

As he spoke, I looked down at the brake handle and felt that sinking feeling. The copilot turned around in time to see the remains of a tire enter the wheelwell and then watched the doors close around it. I knew raising the gear was the last thing I wanted to do. Fortunately, the gauge indicated three-up-and-locked, as I confirmed everything looked normal on the left side. The copilot and mission crew confirmed the starboard-side gear seemed to have raised properly.

I had a moment for reflection as the plane began to climb, "Duh, that was dumb. How did we miss that step?"

There was no time for the "whys;" we had to figure out what to do. We pulled out the pocket checklist (PCL) and read about field landings with both main gear failed. Our exact situation wasn't covered in the

book, but what was there was close enough.

We knew we had to divert to NAS North Island and make an arrested landing. Tower arranged for a Hornet to join up, inspect our gear, and look for any other damage. When he joined, I lowered the gear handle and prayed they would come down. Fortunately, again, the gear came down normally, and the gauge indicated three-down-and-locked. The Hornet pilot confirmed what we saw out our windows: Both main gear had blown, most of the rubber still was on the rim, and no other damage was evident.

The call came from our XO that we were diverting to North Island for an arrested landing. In any emergency situation where time permits, it is standard operating procedures for the aircraft commander to get into the left seat, if he already wasn't there. Because the copilot was the aircraft commander, we switched seats, so he would be in the left and taking the trap. We made the appropriate radio calls to check out of the ship's airspace, headed toward the beach, and reluctantly declared an emergency (self-inflicted) with approach control.

Once at North Island, we made a straight-in approach to runway 36. An LSO was on-station to help talk us into the wires. The CAPC (carrier airplane commander), flew a smooth approach and touched down just as the hook grabbed the wire. The rollout was bumpy, but the aircraft stayed in the middle of the runway. We came to a stop in about 400 to 500 feet, with the hook still clutching the wire. He set the parking brake, and we quickly exited the aircraft as the fire trucks came roaring up. They were there just in case one of the wheels had caught on fire, which did not happen.


As I exited on the left side of the aircraft, I had my first look at the damage. It looked like just a flat tire, though the hole was large. I was surprised; I had expected more damage. That's when I walked around to the other side, where all that remained was the rim. All the rubber had been removed during the landing, and three large pieces of the rim were on the ground near the back of the plane. A good portion of the rim had been ground off. As I looked closer, I could see through the top of the rim, down onto the brakes; they also had hit the ground a few times and had been damaged. A track about 10 feet long and a

quarter-of-an-inch deep extended behind the complete width of the rim; the asphalt now was removed. Behind that, as far as I could see, a replica of the edges of the rim was engraved in the runway, interrupted about every three feet by a six-inch patch the width of the rim. This was where the rim had rolled down the runway, and the stretch directly behind the rim was where the pilot had applied the brakes. The aircraft now sat with the starboard rim sunk half-an-inch deep in the runway. We had left our mark on North Island.

A maintenance crew arrived in less than half an hour. It only took two hours to get two new tires and to raise the aircraft back to its original height. Though it took a day to get a new brake for the starboard gear, the maintenance crew quickly replaced it and got us on our way back to the ship.

We were on shore for about a day and a half—plenty of time to figure why we had forgotten to release the brake. What were the causal factors? We had sat on the catapult, annoyed at our FOD and at having to wait before taking off. We had relaxed and then quickly were brought back to reality when the ship was ready to launch us. The deck crew was in a hurry, and we rushed to make sure we were ready. There was no taxiing forward into the shuttle, and we quickly were put in tension. That's when we missed one of the last steps on the checklist. Our final checks in the cockpit focused more on the dashboard in a FOD search, than it did at the bottom of the control pedestal that houses the parking-brake handle. I had not called out "parking brake off," and no one caught it.

Every part of the process is important. If you need to focus on a specific area, you cannot sacrifice another area. Also, aircrew must avoid being rushed through something as critical as a cat shot. If you make the shooter wait a few extra seconds while you make sure everything is as it should be, it could be the difference between a normal cat shot and leaving large amounts of your tires on the deck. More importantly, it could mean the difference between life and death. That is a lesson I will not forget soon.

As I entered the ready room after returning to the ship from North Island, I was greeted with a number of new call signs, none of which I'll share. I also was told I had about 10 minutes before I was to brief for my next flight. I still needed to get that night currency. 

Lt. Rowland flies with VAW-117.